

**FROM:** Elaine Colgan  
**DATE:** 9 December 2020

**TO:** Minister Robin Swann

**SUB-XXXX-2020: AMENDMENTS TO INTERNATIONAL TRAVEL REGULATIONS  
INCORPORATING BRIEFING FOR COVID-19 OPERATIONS COMMITTEE  
MEETING ON THURSDAY 10TH DECEMBER AT 9:15-10:45**

**Issue:** There are a number of proposed amendments to the International Travel Regulations for which we seek Minister's approval. In addition COVID-19 Operations Committee has asked for a call to discuss the travel exemptions list and the current situation with mink. **INV-1971-2020 refers.**

**Timescale:** Urgent – COVID-19 Operations meeting at 10:45 - 12:15am on Thursday 10 December 2020.

**Presentational Issues:** Any issues around International Travel Regulations is likely to attract media attention – Cleared by Press Office – 9/12/2020(PMcC)

**FOI Issues:** Likely to be disclosable.

**Financial Implications:** None

**Executive Referral:** A briefing paper and letter will be provided for Executive to note the amendments to the regulations.

**Equality, Human Rights  
And Rural Needs**

**Implications:** Not Applicable

**Recommendation:**

That you:

- a. Agree there would be no changes to the travel corridors for NI this week (para 4);
- b. Agree to the recommendations at para 7 in relation to Poland;
- c. Agree that the self-isolation period will be reduce to 10 days with effect of Monday 14 December (para 9-11);
- d. Agree that NI would not introduce Test to Release (para 12-18);
- e. Note the sectoral exemptions to be made this week as previous approved (para 19);
- f. Approve in principal an exemption for international workers required to return home for resilience breaks (para 20-23);
- g. Agree to the alignment of enforcement of FPNs with the other Covid-19 regulations (para 24-25); and
- h. Issue the draft letter to Stephen Donnelly attached at Annex A.

**Background**

1. COVID-19 Operations Committee has asked for a DA Ministerial call to discuss amendments to the Health Protection (Coronavirus, International Travel) Regulations and other issues. This will take place at 09.15am to 10.45am on Thursday 10 December 2020. The data analysis prepared by JBC/PHE is attached in this email (the Weekly Monitoring of Travel Corridors) for 9 December 2020.
2. The COVID-O meeting agenda is: (Elaine Colgan and Dr Naresh Chada will attend)
  - 1) Mink & Travel Corridors | 10:45-11:15 (see section B below)
  - 2) Christmas Transport Plans | 11:15-11:45

### 3) Risk Stratification | 10:45 - 12:15

#### **A. Detail**

3. The International Travel Regulations came into effect on 8 June 2020. They require those arriving into Northern Ireland who have been outside of the CTA within the previous 14 days to:
  - a. Complete a passenger locator form online (the 'information requirement')
  - b. Self-isolate for 14 days from the time they entered the CTA, except when returning from countries on the exempted countries list.
4. Following analysis by the JBC, there are no proposed changes expected for the travel corridors this week. Scotland, England and Wales are likely to support this, although there is continued concern over the number of imported cases from the Canaries. This will be kept under review next week.

#### **B. Risk of Minks**

5. The Joint Biosecurity Centre has developed a methodology to assess the risk posed by Minks and other mustelid animals in terms of the potential for variant strains of Covid-19 to arise. This main areas of consideration are the in-country surveillance measures in place to monitor Covid-19 in minks; sequencing to ensure additional strains are identified early; measures taken to reduce spread further; the number of cases in the mink population; and whether additional strains have previously been identified.
6. The methodology will identify one of five levels of risk associated with each country assessed, running from Level 0 as the lowest risk, to Level 4 as the highest. The first country to be fully assessed has been Poland as this was identified as the highest risk to the UK in terms of potential for imported cases. This is partly due to the numbers of arriving travellers from Poland, a high proportion of whom are exempt from self-isolation due to their occupation. This work has assessed Poland as Level 3 risk, meaning:

***“Mink farms are present with very limited or no measures in place to detect and control problematic variants. While there is no evidence of a problematic variant being present in, or originating from, the country, we have low confidence that it would be detected and/or controlled effectively. Measures in place within the country may not fully mitigate the risk to the UK from inbound travel, therefore additional UK-based surveillance measures are recommended in addition to self-isolation as a precautionary approach”***

7. As a consequence the Covid-0 paper recommends the following measures are taken to reduce the risk of importation of a variant strain from Poland, in addition to keeping Poland off the travel corridors list.
  - i. Surveillance and intelligence from FCDO posts and other in-country sources such as health and animal health links should continue (to be applied to all fur-farming countries);
  - ii. targeted genome sequencing of positive cases in the UK with travel history from Poland in the last 14 days; and
  - iii. HO/BF to conduct analysis of the number of workers claiming agricultural exemptions on arrival from Poland and, if significant, work to extend testing and sequencing programmes to those workers. Where workers are captured by existing testing programmes samples should be retained to enable genome sequencing.
  
8. It is proposed that NI agrees to these recommendations at Covid-0 tomorrow.

### **C. Reduction in Self isolation period**

9. As you will be aware the four Health Ministers agreed a reduction in the self-isolation period from 14 days to 10 days. This will be for close contacts of positive cases, and international arrivals from non-exempt countries. England and Scotland have agreed to implement this as of Monday 14 December with a public announcement planned for Friday 11 December.
  
10. Wales have announced today that they will implement this change with effect from Thursday 10 December. This is not advised, particularly given it is not supported

by operational changes to the passenger locator form, as these will not be ready until Monday.

11. We therefore seek your approval for this change to be implemented with effect from Monday 14<sup>th</sup> December, in line with Scotland and England.

#### **D. Test to Release (TTR)**

12. As you are aware England have announced that travellers arriving in England from 15 December can choose either to self-isolate the full period, or reduce this subject to a privately obtained negative COVID-19 test taken on day 5.
13. The evidence for the introduction of TTR was partly based on research which was conducted with passengers to assess their willingness to pay for a test to reduce the period of self-isolation by one week. The research assumed a lower cost of PCR test than is currently available in Northern Ireland. Using these assumptions uptake was in the region of 30% of passengers.
14. The reduction in self-isolation period will mean in the majority of cases the test will only reduce self-isolation by 2-3 days, although some on-site tests provide a quicker result. Combined with the higher cost of the test, uptake is expected to be lower than found using the research conducted a few months ago.
15. The introduction of a Test to Release scheme in NI would require significant work on the part of those working in the testing policy and operation teams and in contact tracing. Both areas are already under significant pressure due to the current case load. Data sharing mechanisms would be required to ensure positive cases were transferred to PHA from private providers and appropriate action could be taken. Additional enforcement processes would be required to ensure PSNI was able to verify if the tests had been conducted and negative results received by those no longer self-isolating. Given the imminent reduction in the period of self-isolation to 10 days, it is unlikely this would be the best use of resource.
16. In addition to the resource issue for the public sector bodies, there would be concerns on the testing capacity of the NHS as a whole should test providers divert

increasing numbers of test kits to the private market. It is also likely some would seek a free NHS test in order to reduce their self-isolation, even though measures would be introduced to attempt to prevent this happening.

17. Instead of introducing test and release in NI, we propose that officials continue to work with DfT and other DA colleagues on other options which will be more sustainable and assist the re-starting of the tourism sector here. This could include for example a negative test being required prior to travel, as is already in place in other EU countries, combined with use of mass testing devices on arrival.
18. Your agreement is therefore sought that officials do not continue to work on the implementation of test and release for NI, but instead focus efforts on other options with the aim of introducing an alternative policy within the next 2-3 months.

#### **E. Sectorial Amendments**

19. You previously approved the introduction of an exemption from self-isolation requirements for journalists, persons involved in high end TV production and newly signed elite sportspeople (13 November Covid-0). You are asked to note these legislative changes will also be made this week.

#### **F. UN workers**

20. The Department was approached by a UN worker in autumn requesting an exemption is put in place in the UK to cover international workers required to return home regularly for resilience breaks due to the high pressure environments they experience in their work. This is in line with an EU Council recommendation on those who should be exempt from self-isolation as a consequence of travel.
21. It had been our understanding that the recent FCDO amendment to the civil servants' exemption would cover this, however this was incorrect. Officials continue to work with DSO to develop an exemption which would cover such people as the case for this is compelling given the nature of the roles in question and the regularity of travel.

22. Your agreement in principal is sought at this point, to enable us to advise other UK regions that this will be introduced here and to seek UK wide alignment. Our aim would be to introduce this in NI early in January.

23. Your final approval will be sought prior to the regulations being made, [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]. We expect the numbers to be low.

**G. Enforcement provision**

[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]

25. Your approval is sought in insert the same provisions in the international travel regulations that are already in the other sets of NI Covid-19 regulations.

**H. Data sharing with ROI**

26. You will be aware of ongoing issues with sharing of passenger data arriving into ROI who travel on to NI. It was believed that a revision to the Irish Passenger Locator Form, which has now been done, would remedy this issue however Dublin officials have now advised that this is not the case. Indeed the amendment has unintentionally made things worse, in that it is no longer possible to distinguish NI bound passengers from those transiting through Dublin airport. ROI colleagues have advised this will be rectified, but as yet no timescale has been given.

27. We continue to liaise regularly with ROI counterparts and have a further meeting arranged this week. However progress is slow and we are uncertain if this issue is

really gaining any traction there. A draft letter to Minister NR to ask for his assistance in rectifying this matter more urgently is attached at annex A. This would be copied to Grant Shapps, SoS for Transport, as he and his officials have been engaging at UKG level to try to assist us with resolving this issue.

## **Recommendation**

28. It is recommended that you:

- a. Agree there would be no changes to the travel corridors for NI this week (para 4);
- b. Agree to the recommendations at para 7 in relation to Poland;
- c. Agree that the self-isolation period will be reduce to 10 days with effect of Monday 14 December (para 9-11);
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- g. Agree to the alignment of enforcement of FPNs with the other Covid-19 regulations (para 24-25); and
- h. Issue the draft letter to Stephen Donnelly attached at **Annex A**.

**Elaine Colgan**

Ex I&S

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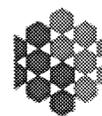
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**Annex A**



Department of  
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[www.health-ni.gov.uk](http://www.health-ni.gov.uk)

Our Ref:

Date: XX December 2020

Dear NR

You may recall I wrote to you in October about the challenges in respect of international arrivals into Dublin who are travelling immediately on to Northern Ireland. As I set out in that letter, the current position is that such individuals are not required to complete the Irish passenger locator form, and whilst they are legally required to complete our online form, there is no effective way to enforce or monitor this at present.

Despite efforts to resolve this issue through CMO meetings and official channels, we have not made much progress. I welcomed the revision of the Irish Passenger Locator form to include the facility to gather data on passengers travelling to NI which would have addressed the existing issues sufficiently. However my officials have now advised that this revision has unintentionally aggravated the situation as it is no longer possible to distinguish NI bound passengers from those transiting through Dublin airport. This would mean that were we to face a similar situation to Denmark, it would not be possible to identify how many passengers had travelled to NI via Dublin from Denmark or to distinguish them from other transiting passengers.

I am aware of ongoing liaison between officials from my department and yours and we have been advised that the situation would be rectified. However as we have not been given an indication of timescale I would ask that you give this matter your urgent attention as the risk is rapidly increasing of the inability to monitor persons arriving into NI from abroad. It is so clearly in our mutual interest to be able to rapidly identify

and trace people anywhere on this island to curtail further spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus.

I am copying this letter to the UK SoS for Transport, Grant Shapps.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely

Robin Swann

